

Reptiles in Ceylon.

From the Rev. A. LANSOON'S "THE SNAKES OF SRI LANKA."

A DOMESTIC SNAKE.

A "snake house" is not one of the institutions of my garden, and yet you may visit the garden many times without seeing a snake. But we can be serpent-charmers in writing, and make them come at our bidding. The "rat-snake," as the English call him, and "Garaduwa," the Singhalese, and "Cerophaea Neumanni," the zoologists, will be the first to come, because he is, of all the serpent race in Ceylon the most domesticated and the most common in such gardens as this. But the bungalow is the place where you are most likely to find him. It is difficult at first to regard a great black snake, six or seven feet long, in that light. New-comers, especially before they have learnt to distinguish between good and evil in tropical life, think it's lack of good taste, and shudder at the idea of a pet of that description. But the "rat-snake" is harmless to man, and often proves a valuable ally in ridding the bungalow of a host of pests which would otherwise interfere very seriously with domestic happiness. It must be stated, however, that I have only known one case in which the animal received anything like petting in a European house, and there it seemed on familiar terms with the household, and was free of the entire building. In native houses the pet snake is not at all uncommon. Wolf says, in his "Life and Adventures in Ceylon":—"I once saw an example of this in the house of a native. It being meal time, he called his snake, which immediately came forth from the roof under which he and I were sitting. He gave it morsels from his own dish, which the snake took of itself from off a fig leaf that was laid for it, and ate along with its host. When it had eaten its fill, he gave it a kiss and bade it go to its hole." My first acquaintance with this friendly serpent took place on the day after my arrival in Ceylon, sixteen years ago. I was bathing, reclining in the enjoyment of a big tub of cold water. On lifting my head with a view of getting out of the bath, to my horror I saw the head of a snake coming through an air-hole in the bottom of the bath-room door, and it seemed as if there was a great deal more of him to follow. You can guess the situation. The door was the only means of egress from a very small room. The shivering fit with which I was seized was not due to the cold water. I shouted at the top of my voice. Two or three servants came running with sticks to the door; but as they were Singhalese boys, and I just arrived, I could not understand a word of what they said. Neither could I understand the fact that no attempt was made to kill the snake, until my friend, the missionary, in whose house I was staying, came and explained that it was "only a rat-snake," and that the servants were disgusted with me for making such a noise about it. The snake in the meantime had retired. At one of your first dinners in Ceylon, you will hear a hurrying and a scurrying on the thin ceiling cloth over your head. An animal will squeak in mortal agony—caught! This will be followed by a disagreeable sound of crunching bones. You look up in terror to see the cloth bent towards you with a pearly waviness. Your host will put on that superior smile which indicates vast experience and perfect astuteness. With such horrors, and will say, "It is only a rat-snake." It's dinner-hour up there, too."

THE COBRA.

There is another snake which is really venomous, and which, though happily not so common as the domestic creature we have just left, seems to have decided preference for bungalow life; and that is the dreaded "Cobra de Ceylon." Now you may be a long time in Ceylon without seeing a cobra, except in a basket of a serpent charmer; and you may possibly see it almost immediately after your arrival. It is one of the delusions uncertainties of life in the Tropics. I have not seen one for months. I was in Ceylon many months before I saw one. But some time ago a young lady came out to be married to a friend of ours. They were married on the day after her arrival. On reaching the bungalow by the seaside which they had engaged for the honeymoon, an old disused house, the lady went to a dressing-table, where, in pulling a drawer out, a great hooded cobra lifted its head before her frightened gaze. The head of Medusa could hardly have imparted a more rigid astonishment to the young lady than that hissing serpentine welcome. She naturally received the impression (she was not bitten) that such sights were common in Ceylon; but she has lived there long enough now to learn that that early experience of hers was an exceedingly uncommon one.

SNAKE-CHARMER.

It seems that the cobra is not really anxious to use its deadly fangs. On the contrary, it is said to be very reluctant. It is also said that the freedom and safety with which it is handled by the snake-charmers is due to this reluctance; though I have known cases of fatal bites even among snake-charmers. Jugglers frequently come to my garden, offering their exhibitions, and sometimes they will offer to find snakes, which invariably means that they will find a cobra which they have surreptitiously concealed in the garden.

OLD SNAKES.

I have known Englishmen handle cobras as fearlessly and familiarly as natives. There was a man in my Soldiers' Home Class, who rejoiced in the nickname of "Old Snakes," which name was given him by his comrades because of his passion for catching snakes. The more dangerous they

were, the greater the fascination of the pursuit. One of the men, speaking of him, said to me one day, "You never see anybody with such a nose for a snake!" Karawala, and whip snakes, and the smaller fry he despised; but cobras, porcupines, and even pythons were his delight. He told me once he thought a cobra "one of the prettiest things in the world." With lightning rapidity he would grasp the "neck" of the largest cobra, and in a few minutes the serpent's mouth was stitched together, by means of a needle and thread which "Old Snakes" always carried in his tame for this purpose. I met him in England during a recent visit, when he informed me that "the worst of England is there's no snakes like nothing. I'd give anything for a good cobra!"

TAME COBRAS.

My colleague, Mr. Goonewardene, has just been telling me about a member of one of our congregation in the neighborhood of Negombo, a Singhalese man who kept a large number of tame cobras in the house. They were quite domesticated into pets, and never on any occasion injured the members of the household, but formed a capital protection against thieves. The owner of the house was regarded by his superstitious neighbors as one who used black arts, not consistent with a profession of Christianity. I must say that it would require a strong sense of duty to make me include his house in my regular pastoral visitation.

CHAMELEONS.

We have not got the crocodile in the garden, of course, but you will meet with many other varieties of lizard life in the course of a short stroll. Among them you will see the chameleon, the hero of "The Travelling Fool," the poem beginning with the well-known lines:—

Satirized at his ease, the beast I viewed,
And saw him eat the air for food.

And you probably have an opportunity of seeing some of its remarkable color changes. The "blood-suckers," so called not because it sucks blood, but because of the blood red appearance of its head and puffed neck when irritated, will be sure to come into view. Here they are in all colors: some are long, and some are short; some with pointed heads, and others blunt; some exceedingly impudent, and others very shy; some with backs like saws, and others smooth and snaky; so great a variety will my garden set forth.

THE GECKO.

The dear little gecko deserves more than a passing word. It is a little whitish-green lizard, sometimes gray, about the length of your longest finger. It is thoroughly domestic, and keeps very much to the bungalow, and there are very few houses in Ceylon where it may not be found clinging the flies over the walls or up against the ceiling, which its little prehensile feet enable it to stick to with much ease and firmness as the fly it pursues. Sometimes many of them may be seen coursing over these "happy hunting grounds" at the same time. It is interesting to watch them, as the evening comes on, and as soon as the lamps are lit, come out from behind picture frames or book-cases to begin their exciting pursuits. Their bright little protuberant eyes appear to be scanning the "country" for "game." A fly, perhaps a mosquito, is discerned in the distance. The gecko goes slowly towards it in an unconscious sort of way, as if it would make believe that it was only out for an evening stroll, and didn't mean business. This farce is kept up till within a short distance of its prey. Then you see a movement sudden as lightning, a little click follows, and the gecko is eating the fly with much self-esteem. If the hunt is a very exciting one, you may see the gecko cast off part of its tail. I have often seen it do that, and the tail-piece so cast off wriggles for some time with life its possesses. You recognise your little friend again for some days by the bluntness of his tail, a defect, however, which is speedily remedied by its great power of reproduction.

Submarine Warfare.

A new submarine torpedo boat appears to have advanced the question of submarine warfare to an important stage. The new vessel is cigar-shaped, pointed at both ends, 60 feet long, and 8 feet in diameter amidships, exclusive of a slightly raised central deck. The desideratum for vessels of the class has been a simple and ready means of submersion, and of again rising to the surface as frequently as may be desired, and various mechanical plans to secure this have been adopted. The principle upon which immersion and emersion depend in the case of the new boat is simply that of displacement. While lying on the surface the boat has a certain amount of displacement. When it is desired to submerge her, this displacement is reduced, and increased when she is wanted to be raised to the surface again. It is something analogous to a telescope, which if dropped into the water when fully extended, will float for a certain time, but will sink at once if dropped when closed. Displacement is reduced or increased by means of cylindrical chambers, which are projected or withdrawn telescopically from the sides of the vessel, and by this simple means she can be made to rise or fall in the water slowly or quickly at the will of those in command. There is room for six persons in the central portion of the vessel, and air under pressure is stored on board for use when under water. Electric glow-lamps provide light. In the experiments the boat was many times submerged to the bottom of the dock, about 17 feet, and brought to the surface again on a perfectly level keel.

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